

## Examining the Question of Puerto Rican Independence

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### **I. Introduction**

The United States House of Representatives recently introduced H.R. 2757, known as the Puerto Rican Status Act,<sup>1</sup> which has the potential to significantly impact the relationship the United States has with one of its main territories forever. It would give Puerto Rican residents the opportunity to vote on November 2, 2025 and determine whether the territory of Puerto Rico will begin to “self-govern” and declare independence from the United States.<sup>2</sup> Congress introduced this Act after years of discourse about whether Puerto Rico should remain a territory with the United States, become the fifty-first state, or separate and become its own country. Puerto Rico—a territory with its own culture, language, and heritage of mixed origins—is known to have a unique history and perspective compared to the United States. Many have expressed both the benefits and issues of U.S. government policies that Puerto Rico is subject to. While Puerto Ricans enjoy benefits like American citizenship and the freedom to travel back and forth from the States, one significant detriment to the island’s territory status is that Puerto Rican residents are not allowed to vote in U.S. presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> This exclusion has left Puerto Rican citizens alienated from other citizens and has sparked debate surrounding their island’s status.

The island became a part of the U.S. after the States won the Spanish-American War of 1898, forcing Spain to give up Puerto Rico alongside other places like the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> P.R. Status Act, H.R. 2757, 118th Cong. (1st Sess. 2023).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Tanner Stening, *Can Puerto Ricans Vote in the Presidential Election? What Role Do US Territories Play in Elections?*, Northeastern Global News (Oct. 2024), [news.northeastern.edu/2024/10/28/can-puerto-ricans-vote-presidential-election](https://news.northeastern.edu/2024/10/28/can-puerto-ricans-vote-presidential-election).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Davis, *100 Years of Puerto Rico: Puerto Rico Becomes a U.S. Territory*, Libr. Cong. Blogs (Mar. 2017), [blogs.loc.gov/law/2017/03/100-years-of-puerto-rico-puerto-rico-becomes-a-u-s-territory](https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2017/03/100-years-of-puerto-rico-puerto-rico-becomes-a-u-s-territory).

U.S. won Puerto Rico at the war's conclusion. Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, a professor of Latin American history at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, argues that one reason it became merely a territory is because the national government saw Puerto Ricans as too “barbaric” to govern themselves.<sup>5</sup> This negative idea and the conflict between the U.S. and the territory are still relevant today not only because of the House bill, but also due to recent conversations about how American politicians view Puerto Rico. At a Trump 2024 rally, comedian Tony Hinchcliffe criticized Puerto Rico in a viral statement, calling it “a floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean right now.”<sup>6</sup> During an election these residents cannot even vote in, Puerto Rican residents and Latino voters alike expressed in the media how hurt they felt that a political rally would feature a speaker like that.<sup>7</sup> Since then, there has been increased discourse surrounding Puerto Rican independence from the United States due to benefits like U.S. citizenship and free markets, but also issues like the lack of political representation and added debt. The discourse surrounding this complex issue often promotes one of three distinct perspectives: Puerto Rico becoming its own country, securing statehood, or remaining a territory. All three perspectives are important to take into consideration.

## **II. Analyzing Puerto Rican Separation from the United States**

Many Puerto Ricans residing on the island have recognized multiple reasons to separate from the United States, such as the increased tax and debt that is taken on as issued by the U.S. federal government. In 2021, the median family income of a Puerto Rican resident was about \$35,700.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, for the U.S. to have a Puerto Rican resident take on great amounts of debt

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<sup>5</sup> Aspen Pflughoeft, *Why Did Puerto Rico Become Part of the US? And Why Is It Not a State? Experts Explain*, Mia. Herald (Oct. 2023), [miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article280629805.html](https://miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article280629805.html).

<sup>6</sup> Phil McCausland & Christal Hayes, *Backlash After Comedian at Trump Rally Calls Puerto Rico 'Island of Garbage'*, BBC News (Oct. 2024), [bbc.com/news/articles/cy9jj2g75q4o](https://bbc.com/news/articles/cy9jj2g75q4o).

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr., *Puerto Ricans in Must-Win Pennsylvania Say Trump Rally Joke Won't Be Forgotten*, BBC News (Oct. 2024), [bbc.com/news/articles/cgj7689v757o](https://bbc.com/news/articles/cgj7689v757o).

<sup>8</sup> Luis Palomino & Charles R. Venator-Santiago, *Historical Income and Poverty Profile of Puerto Rican Migrants and Latin American Immigrants in Connecticut, 2000–2021* 2 (2023).

and taxes is significantly damaging, especially if they earn the median income. Furthermore, Congress did not give the island a financial board of advisors until 2016, a year after Puerto Rico's debts rose to hundreds of billions of dollars.<sup>9</sup> The majority of this board—the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico—is chosen by the President of the United States, with only one member chosen by the actual governor of Puerto Rico.<sup>10</sup> This limits Puerto Rico's power as the governor is not given authority to determine what his own community needs, particularly in terms of relieving financial crises. In the board's annual report for 2024, it outlines a plan for debt restructuring that has been ongoing.<sup>11</sup> While progress in reducing debt is prominent, there remains billions of dollars of debt the island is responsible for. Financial experts Marc D. Joffe and Jesse Martinez from George Mason University suggest that these financial crises are rooted in Congress' decision to pass laws like the Jones-Shafroth Act, which made undertaking bonds seem like a good idea because it got rid of bonds that collect interest.<sup>12</sup> However, it ended up making individuals pay even more than the loan they were given,<sup>13</sup> ultimately harming Puerto Rican citizens.

Puerto Rico also experienced extreme financial devastation during natural disasters, such as Hurricane Maria in 2017 during which a blackout caused many to lose power for months.<sup>14</sup> The territory's relationship with the U.S. became strained due to feelings that the States' attempts to provide aid were not helpful. During this crisis, President Donald Trump threw paper towels into a crowd of Puerto Rican citizens.<sup>15</sup> These images went viral and were criticized for being

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<sup>9</sup> Diana Roy & Amelia Cheatham, *Puerto Rico: A U.S. Territory in Crisis*, Council on Foreign Relations (Jan. 2025), [cfr.org/background/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis](https://cfr.org/background/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis).

<sup>10</sup> Fin. Oversight & Mgmt. Bd. P.R., *About Us*, [oversightboard.pr.gov/about-us](https://oversightboard.pr.gov/about-us).

<sup>11</sup> Fin. Oversight & Mgmt. Bd. P.R., *Annual Report 2024 25* (2024).

<sup>12</sup> Marc Joffe & Jesse Martinez, *Origins of the Puerto Rico Fiscal Crisis* 6 (2016).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Murali Baggu, *Puerto Rico Grid and Recovery Post Hurricane Maria* 4 (2022).

<sup>15</sup> BBC News, *Puerto Rico: Trump Paper Towel-Throwing 'Abominable'* (Oct. 2017), [bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41504165](https://bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41504165).

insulting.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, there are key differences between the economic aid in the States versus Puerto Rico, such as Puerto Rican residents typically being ineligible for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). EITC is a U.S credit that allows those who make under a certain monetary amount to earn more than what the Puerto Rican EITC gives.<sup>17</sup> There was even a Congress bill introduced titled “Earned Income Tax Credit Equity for Puerto Rico Act of 2023” aimed at allowing Puerto Ricans to receive an equal credit to other citizens.<sup>18</sup> To this day the bill has still only been introduced and referred to a committee; no other Congressional action has taken place since January 2023.<sup>19</sup> This inaction highlights how financial inequality remains unresolved yet prevalent in Puerto Rico.

Despite paying for some of the required federal taxes like Social Security and Medicare,<sup>20</sup> islanders are not granted equal political representation. The only representative Puerto Ricans have in the House of Representatives is the Resident Commissioner, who cannot even vote on bills on the House floor.<sup>21</sup> Overall, there are many arguments towards separating from the United States such as a lack of voice in the political and economic spheres.

### **III. Analyzing Puerto Rican Statehood**

On the other hand, others have questioned why Puerto Rico is not a state, and argue that Puerto Rico could join the States in order to alleviate some of these double standards. In fact, in 2012 and 2020, former President Biden expressed support for Puerto Rico’s statehood in order to balance the inequalities and lack of political representation expressed by Puerto Ricans.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Internal Revenue Serv., *Bona Fide Residents of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico—Tax Credits* (Mar. 2025), [irs.gov/individuals/bona-fide-residents-of-the-commonwealth-of-puerto-rico-tax-credits](https://irs.gov/individuals/bona-fide-residents-of-the-commonwealth-of-puerto-rico-tax-credits).

<sup>18</sup> Earned Income Tax Credit Equity for P.R. Act, H.R. 257, 118th Cong. (1st Sess. 2023).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Internal Revenue Serv., *Topic No. 903, U.S. Employment Tax in Puerto Rico* (Dec. 2024), [irs.gov/taxtopics/tc903](https://irs.gov/taxtopics/tc903).

<sup>21</sup> Jane A. Hudiburg, *Parliamentary Rights of the Delegates and Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico* 2 (2022).

<sup>22</sup> P.R. 51st, *Does Joe Biden Support Statehood for Puerto Rico?* (Dec. 2020) [pr51st.com/does-joe-biden-support-statehood-for-puerto-rico](https://pr51st.com/does-joe-biden-support-statehood-for-puerto-rico).

However, in 2020, President Biden clarified that he believed this choice should be left up to the islanders.<sup>23</sup> Becoming a state could also allow the United States to provide and receive greater funds to and from the island without the limitations that come with being a territory.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the U.S. Government Accountability Office conducted an analysis in 2009 that found that the U.S. could have had an increase in billions of dollars in income taxes if Puerto Rico was a state.<sup>25</sup> The possibility that Puerto Rico's economic and political condition could be improved if it were to pursue statehood should be calculated and considered. In 2023, a University of Connecticut professor even found that seventy-five percent of Puerto Rican residents would likely vote in favor of becoming an official state.<sup>26</sup>

#### **IV. Analyzing Puerto Rico as a Territory**

Despite these economic arguments, other individuals and organizations like the Heritage Foundation claim that the U.S. would collect further debt by needing to fund Puerto Rico if it were to become a state.<sup>27</sup> Some argue that the opposite could occur, noting that Puerto Rico has relied on the United States' aid for so long that, if it were to become its own state, its economy would suffer without the funding that the U.S. grants.<sup>28</sup> The mixing of cultures is also mentioned as a reason to keep Puerto Rico a territory, as the island has its own culture and language. In fact, these political concerns have even translated to the modern pop culture of America. Puerto Rican

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<sup>23</sup> Cable-Satellite Pub. Aff.s Network, *Joe Biden Remarks at Hispanic Heritage Month Event in Kissimmee, Florida* at 29:55 (Sept. 2020), [c-span.org/program/campaign-2020/joe-biden-remarks-at-hispanic-heritage-month-event-in-kissimmee-florida/552914?offset=1867000000000](https://c-span.org/program/campaign-2020/joe-biden-remarks-at-hispanic-heritage-month-event-in-kissimmee-florida/552914?offset=1867000000000).

<sup>24</sup> M. A. Chernykh, *Making Puerto Rico the 51st State: Prospects under the Biden Administration*, 92 *Herald Russ. Acad. Sci.* 1495, 1497 (2023).

<sup>25</sup> U.S. GAO, *Puerto Rico: Information on How Statehood Would Potentially Affect Selected Federal Programs and Revenue Sources* 2 (2014).

<sup>26</sup> John Henry Smith, *To be or not to be a US state: Will it really be a question for Puerto Rico?*, Connecticut Public Radio (Nov. 2023), [ctpublic.org/news/2023-11-27/to-be-or-not-to-be-a-us-state-will-it-really-be-a-question-for-puerto-rico](https://ctpublic.org/news/2023-11-27/to-be-or-not-to-be-a-us-state-will-it-really-be-a-question-for-puerto-rico).

<sup>27</sup> Robert DePosada, *Caution Needed on Puerto Rico Statehood: The Costly, Confusing, and Contentious Repercussions of H.R. 856* 1 (1997).

<sup>28</sup> R. Sam Garrett, *Political Status of Puerto Rico: Brief Background and Recent Developments for Congress* 3 (2024).

celebrities, like singer Bad Bunny, have spoken about the fear of losing their culture if the island was to become a state. In his song, “Lo Que Le Pasó A Hawaii,” which translates to “What Happened to Hawaii,” Bunny expresses the fear of Puerto Rico losing their authenticity and nature landmarks due to Western ideals.<sup>29</sup> While Hawaii is recognized for having its own distinct culture and Native islanders, increases in tourism have caused islanders to express feelings of loss.<sup>30</sup> Similar to Puerto Rico’s fear, Hawaii’s influx of new American residents has led to construction and housing development that has destroyed nature.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Puerto Ricans have seen their concerns play out when other territories became states, leading to some opposing statehood.

## V. Conclusion

Thus, the question of whether or not Puerto Rico should separate from the United States is a complicated issue with many points of view to consider. All sides believe that their solution would lead to increased political and economic equity for Puerto Rico. Yet the solution for what Puerto Rico could become, if not a territory, varies for many reasons. Should H.R. 2757 pass, residents would be able to consider all of these options and make a decision that will benefit their island, culture, and relationship with the U.S. before the end of 2025.

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<sup>29</sup> Bad Bunny, *Lo Que Le Pasó A Hawaii*, on *Debí Tirar Más Fotos* (Rimas Ent. 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Lorinda Riley et al., *Ke ala i ka Mauiola: Native Hawaiian Youth Experiences with Historical Trauma*, 19 Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 1 (2022).

<sup>31</sup> Darragh Clayton, *Trouble in Paradise: The Effects of Tourism on the Culture of the Hawaiian Islands*, Univ. P.E.I. (2022), [pressbooks.library.upei.ca/artsreview-xi/chapter/trouble-in-paradise](https://pressbooks.library.upei.ca/artsreview-xi/chapter/trouble-in-paradise).